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ABSTRACT

This study examined a Preparatory Course for Blacks and the Economically Disadvantaged (PBED) in a poor area of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The PBED is an alternative educational project that offers regular classes on evenings and weekends using volunteer labor, donated space, and contributions from students who can afford it. Case studies were used to examine pedagogical strategies and racial consciousness tools employed by the PBED to increase the likelihood that Afro-Brazilians from working poor families would attend highly selective universities (e.g., the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, or CURJ) and how students characterized the influence of the PBED on their educational attainment. The study involved (1) interviews with students who attended PBED classes and graduated from the CURJ, PBED instructors, PBED coordinators, CURJ admissions personnel, and CURJ professors; student focus groups; observations of PBED classroom activities; and analysis of newspapers, publications, and scholarly writings. Results highlight challenges that PBED poses to mainstream notions of equal opportunity, social capital development, and educational attainment in the context of the beginning stages of the debate on race and ethnicity-conscious admissions in Brazilian higher education. (Contains 40 references.) (SM)

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RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN BRAZIL: BLACK COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS THAT DEFY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT CANONS

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RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN BRAZIL: BLACK COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS THAT DEFY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT CANONS

Silvani S. Valentim, Temple University

Background and Purposes

This paper describes an empirical study of a Preparatory Course for Blacks and the Economically Disadvantaged (henceforth PBED) in the northern outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, known as Baixada Fluminense [1]. I employed case study methods in order to assess, describe, and theorize on the social and educational relevance of the PBED for Afro-Brazilian students' educational attainment and social capital development in the context of beginning initiatives to promote race and ethnicity-conscious admissions at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (henceforth CURJ).

Two research questions guided this study: (1) What are the pedagogical strategies and racial consciousness tools employed by the PBED in order to increase the likelihood that Afro-Brazilians from working poor families will attend highly selective universities? (2) How do students characterize the influence of the PBED on their educational attainment? The dissertation aims at analyzing the strategies employed by the PBED in order to advance students' social and cultural capital as a race-conscious experience that impacts educational attainment.

The PBED is an alternative educational project, which offers regular classes on evenings and weekends based on volunteer labor, donated physical space, and the monthly contribution of approximately five dollars from students who can afford it. Every year approximately 500 Afro-Brazilian youngsters attend PBED classes in different sites. Contracts have been made between coordinators of the PBED (usually

leaders of the Black community) and some higher education institutions. Thus, those who attended preparatory classes offered by the PBED (between 1996 and 2000) and fared well on the *Vestibular* exam (the college entrance examination) at CURJ, benefited from an admission policy that accounted for students' race and and ethnic backgrounds[2]. The decision, however, was at the discretion of the university. Unlike the United States, race-conscious admissions as a Federal mandate has never been promoted in Brazil (see Guimarães 1996).

For the vast majority of Afro-Brazilian students, after at least 12 years of schooling under undesirable circumstances, it constitutes an extraordinary effort to break down the cycle of miseducation (see Shujaa 1995) and decide to compete with over-prepared Whites (see Bowen and Bok 1998) for acceptance in highly selective universities. Educational opportunities and school achievement research show that Afro-Brazilians experience more difficulties in their journey through the K-12 school system, leaving them at significant disadvantage when attempting to enter postsecondary education.

Social indicators released in the year 2000 by the Brazilian Statistics Bureau (IBGE), demonstrated that 15 percent of White families have income over 5 times the minimum wage, but only about 3 percent of Afro-Brazilian families have that income. Socioeconomic status (SES) constitutes a consequential factor, which influences both access to education and the returns of investments in education. Research has shown that Afro-Brazilians experience more difficulties than Whites in their journey through the 1-12 school system, leaving them at significant disadvantage when competing for college admission

Similar to the experience of Black South Africans in the pre and post-apartheid era (see Marx 1998; Winant 2001) Afro-Brazilian students tend to attend schools in concentrated pockets of poverty. African Brazilians, more likely than White-Brazilians from the same SES, tend to be served by high schools with fewer resources, less-prepared teachers, fewer college preparation courses, and more crowded conditions.

The articulation of the PBED adds another pillar to the process of challenging the organization of the school system and the very notion of educational opportunity vis-à-vis the Afro-Brazilian population. Contrary to *Militantes* (activists), which tend to assess cultural messages for consensus mobilization, the PBED mobilized potential university students based on racial consciousness, social change, and educational opportunity. Leaders of the PBED employed strategies such as claiming and assuming a Black identity, struggling for citizenship rights (education) and building coalition with other disadvantaged segments of the population (e.g., economically disadvantaged Whites) as a way to mobilize Baixada Fluminense youth.

Conceptual Framework

Having as a theoretical framework the critical sociology of education and Critical Race Theory in education (see Delgado 1995; Tate 1997; Torres and Mitchell 1998; Parker, L, Delyhle, D., Villenes, S. 1999; Torres 2000) this study constitutes a unique contribution to the understanding of the dynamics embedded in educational attainment processes and social capital development. This critical perspective allowed the participants in this study to name and locate their realities within the social, cultural, economic, and historical formations of society as put forth by Freire (1973); Giroux

(1988a; 1988b), Giroux and Simon (1989), Goodman (1992); Shor and Freire, 1987; Weiler 1988).

Cultural theorists such as Bourdieu (1977, 1984) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have contributed new concepts, theories, and methodologies to the study of educational attainment. In particular, Bourdieu's seminal work on reproduction has focused on the roles of schools in reproducing class structures. By looking at the interaction between social structures and a group's habitus (meaning a class-based system of beliefs about the social world) sociologists of education have been able to elucidate the use of class advantage for educational mobility (see Lareau and Horvat 1999).

In the United States, authors such as O'Connor (1999) suggest that personal experiences and knowledge of others' experiences are the bases for the development of multiple visions of opportunity. The results of her study (see also O'Connor 1997) pointed to the need to explore how African-American students situate race, class, and gender and perceive social opportunity within the complex understanding that individuals assume, concomitantly, multiple positions in the stratification system.

Neuman (1993:3) envisions "social capital as consisting of adult organizational networks of communication and shared values that provide collective support for adults and youth in a community." Wehlage (1993: 4) suggests a model in which "social capital describes the kinds of organizational relationships among people that facilitate collective action." Both authors make a great contribution to the understanding of the contradictions or differences between lived and prescribed experiences, and the contexts within which human action is mediated by liberating practices put forth by those being oppressed by

mainstream institutions and social structures (Freire 1985). The PBED challenges institutional, cultural, and social forces that reproduce social inequity and racial injustice.

Afro-Brazilian scholars and activists such as Gonzáles (1980), Santos (1985), Gonçalves (1986), Valentim (1989) and Carneiro (1999) have attempted to articulate the political meaning of racial consciousness and Black organizations' active role in overcoming *miseducation* in the Black community. It is appropriate to argue that systematic efforts have been articulated in Brazil in order to remove race from the status of a mere epiphenomenon (a residue) in educational research as well as in anthropological and sociological analysis of educational settings.

Important studies on race, educational opportunity, and educational attainment[3] in Brazil include Hasenbalg and Silva (1990), Rosemberg (1991), Silva and Hasenbalg (1999). These researchers have suggested that the effects of racial inequalities must not be treated as an epiphenomenon or simply manifestations of "cultural deprivation" and a "culture of poverty," or the "absence of family values." Both in Brazil (see Maggie and Villas Bôas, 2000) and the United States (more so in the latter), scholars have been searching for appropriate ways to assess minority students' experience in mainstream educational institutions (Tierney 1997; McDonough 1997; Platt 1996; Trent 1999).

Methodology and Data Sources

The study included 32 participants and multiple data collection strategies were employed. Research methods involved: (A) Close-ended and structured interviews with students who attended PBED classes on a consistent basis and graduated from the CURJ (20 participants); PBED instructors/mentors (4 participants); coordinators of the PBED (4 participants), CURJ admissions office personnel (2 participants), professors at the CURJ

who are involved with debates and studies on race and ethnicity-conscious admissions (2 participants); (B) two-focus group sessions with the students divided in groups of ten; (C) observational data of PBED classroom activities; (D) analysis of local newspapers, scholarly and political commentary literature, and analysis of publications produced by university think tanks.

Innovative methods such as scenarios and focus groups gave strength to data collection. The former is a creative process in which groups of people who share some commonalities or interests answer to similar stories/situations about the different ways they might perceive the future unfolding. The latter was used with students in order to allow them to dialogue with less inhibition and with the presence of other students who had also attended PBED classes and the same higher education institution. Focus groups diversified the data collection technique by creating an environment in which less personal questions were asked, and a more dynamic and interactive exchange was evident among students.

Importance of this Study

The PBED has become an important site for analysis of how community-based educational programs can add to educational reform and equality of opportunity policies in the context of the need to strengthen Afro-Brazilian students' academic preparedness. The development of social and cultural capital in the context of a Black-community based project remains to be fully understood and theorized. This educational project under study subscribes to new and challenging forms of cultural practice, identity formation, and racial consciousness expressions produced in urban contexts. It epitomizes new ways to cope with exclusion and inequities. Those involved with the PBED believed

that the social and racial condition of students from the Baixada Fluminense as well as their struggle to succeed could become the catalyst of a movement to defy educational attainment canons.

In the heart of the PBED vision rests the notion that academic success is not necessarily achieved based on intellectual effort alone, but rather through the development of students' agency and *conscientization.* This is a process in which students not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deeper awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality (Freire 1985).

This study highlights the challenges the PBED poses to mainstream notions of equality of opportunity, social capital development, and educational attainment in the context of the beginning stages of the debate on race and ethnicity-conscious admissions in the Brazilian higher education system. Findings and recommendations from this study underscore the urgent necessity to promote governmental programs more responsive to the socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial composition of the Brazilian population, especially in urban centers such as Rio de Janeiro.

Endnotes

[1] Baixada Fluminense (a generic name for a concentration of 8 municipalities) is an area with a reputation as being one of the poorest and most violent in Southeast Brazil, with high unemployment and illiteracy. It concentrates 20,1% of the total population of the State of Rio de Janeiro, which amounts to approximately 15 million. In this study only São João de Meriti, Nova Iguaçu, Belford Roxo, and Duque de Caxias are included because of the development of the PBED.

[2] It is a non-standardized admissions exam -- called *Vestibular* - which is administered by both private, confessional, and public universities. After acquiring the minimum score necessary for admission, students compete for acceptance in their chosen fields. Gender, social class, race and

ethnicity, secondary school attended by the applicant, and credentials such as transcripts and letters of recommendation are irrelevant for the acceptance process.

[3] According to McDonough (1998:182), educational attainment denotes how the web of opportunities, structural arrangements, contingencies and timing work together to shape families' and students interactions with, and movement through, schools.

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